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COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
Substantive session
22-31 August 1994
Agenda item 3 (a)*

CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION: PROVISION OF WRITTEN MEETING RECORDS TO SUBSIDIARY BODIES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Possibility of transferring to the Office of Conference Services the staff specialized in the drafting of press releases, so that they could prepare summary records as well

Note by the Secretariat

1. At its 360th meeting, on 2 November 1993, the Committee on Conferences requested the Secretariat to study the possibility of transferring to the Office of Conference Services the staff specialized in the drafting of press releases, so that they could prepare summary records as well, and to submit the results of that study to the Committee at its substantive session of 1994 and to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session. The present note is submitted in response to that request.

2. This is not the first time that the idea has been broached of merging the operations and the staff involved in the preparation of summary records and press releases. In 1979, the possibility of such a merger, which would have resulted in the production of a new type of hybrid record designed to serve the purposes of both press releases and summary records, was considered but was not further explored. The question was raised in the Committee on Conferences in 1983, in connection with the discussion of an abbreviated form of summary record, following which the conclusion was reached that the abbreviated form would not be feasible and that "press releases could not be an acceptable substitute for official records" (A/AC.172/97, para. 5).

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* A/AC.172/154/Add.1.

3. The latest request presumably implies that the preparation of press releases would be discontinued and that the press officers engaged in their preparation would be transferred to the Office of Conference Services and would prepare summary records. This presumption is based on the fact that, unless there were to be a considerable increase in staff resources, it would be impossible for the same group of staff to perform two tasks simultaneously and to prepare both a press release and a summary record of a given meeting. As the work of preparing a press release is finished shortly after the adjournment of a meeting, the press officers concerned are available to cover the next meeting. The précis-writers who prepare the summary record, on the other hand, require half a day after the adjournment of the meeting in order to draft the summary record, so that the next meeting must be covered by a different team.

4. The existing arrangement is that press officers from the Department of Public Information prepare press releases in English and French. Summary records are prepared by staff from the Office of Conference Services, specifically members of the English, French, Russian and Spanish Translation Services of the Translation and Editorial Division. The English Service, which has the lightest translation workload, does the bulk of the précis-writing. The records are subsequently translated into all the working languages of the body concerned. When not preparing summary records, these staff are engaged in translation work.

5. The rationale behind the existing arrangement is that press releases and summary records differ as regards their purpose, their readership, the timing of their issuance and the skills of the staff who prepare them.

Purpose

6. Press releases are not official documents. They are primarily intended for the news media and emphasize what is newsworthy. They contain relatively brief summaries of statements, sometimes preceded by background information on the item under discussion. They are not subject to correction by the speakers.

7. Summary records are official documents constituting the permanent records of the United Nations bodies for which they are authorized. They are intended to provide a clear, concise and balanced picture of the proceedings. They summarize the views of the speakers and record the decisions taken. They undergo careful revision in order to ensure accuracy and consistency of terminology. No background material is included. Speakers may submit corrections to summary records.

Readership

8. Although the speed with which they are issued makes them also useful for delegations, press releases are tailored to the needs of the news media and their readership is composed mainly of media representatives.

9. Summary records are used by government representatives as a permanent record of proceedings; their accuracy and comprehensiveness are guaranteed by the corrections procedure. They are also used by committee secretaries in preparing the committees' reports.

Timing

10. Press releases appear within an hour after the adjournment of each meeting, as they are issued in the language in which they were drafted.

11. Following the adjournment of a meeting, at least one day is required for the drafting and revision of a summary record. Because of the requirement of simultaneous distribution in all languages and the delays currently experienced at the translation stage, several months sometimes elapse between the date of the meeting and the date of issuance of the relevant summary record in all languages.

Staff skills

12. The staff who draft press releases are experienced journalists, who must be thoroughly familiar with the subject-matter of the meeting and spend a considerable amount of time preparing the background information contained in the press releases.

13. Summary records are prepared by linguists, recruited through a competitive examination, who are members of a Translation Service. Their knowledge of languages enables them to listen to speakers in the original language, rather than in the interpretation, to follow texts under discussion in the original language and to record suggestions for textual amendments in the speaker's language.

14. If the staff who draft press releases were to be transferred to the Office of Conference Services and were to prepare summary records, they would not be qualified to do translation work at times when there are no meetings to be covered. Under the existing arrangement, the staff who prepare summary records are reassigned to translation duties when there are no meetings.

Conclusion

15. The differing needs of the users of press releases and summary records would appear to be best met by the existing arrangement whereby the two types of record are prepared by separate staffs. The speed with which press releases are produced meets the need for an immediately available account of proceedings, while the more detailed treatment provided in summary records is useful even if some time elapses before their publication. User satisfaction with summary records can be deduced from the small number of corrections, submitted and it is likely that a less detailed official record would encounter opposition from delegations.